

The Ascension of Our Lord May 08, 2016

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23 or Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:19-23; Luke 24:46-53

The feast of the Ascension of Our Lord is a Mystery. Scriptures tell us that Jesus left his disciples to go back to the heavenly Father and promised to return at the end time. He concluded his earthly ministry and with this began the mission of the church. In today's gospel the disciples were saying goodbye to Jesus and we heard the intimate moment of farewell between friends. As he prepared to depart from the earth he offered them his parting gifts: the gift of understanding so that they were able to comprehend the meaning of the Scriptures. He did promise that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit and gave them his final loving blessing and told them that he would not abandon them but remain with them till the end of times. The reaction of the disciples shows a striking transformation. Luke tells us that they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, praising and worshipping God. They were now certainly different from the frightened little band that had gone into hiding, run away from all authorities in Jerusalem particularly after the crucifixion. Now they were transformed into new persons, strengthened with faith and with the hope of the future. The Lord instructed them to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the world but they were also told to await the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Heavenly messengers were beside the apostles as an evidence of God's continued assistance. They assured the apostles that the Lord will come back to them as they had seen him go up to heaven accompanied by the clouds.

This Feast of the Ascension commemorates the elevation of Christ into Heaven by his own power in the presence of his disciples on the fortieth day after His glorious Resurrection. The Ascension of Jesus tells us that the Lord has completed His earthly work of our redemption. Through his numerous apparitions to hundreds of people between the Day of his Resurrection and the Day of His Ascension, Jesus proved two things: First, he proved that he was the promised Messiah that had come to redeem them. Secondly, he proved that through he who overcame death, those who persevere in their living faith shall also overcome death and inherit the Kingdom of God. St. Augustine believes that the observance of the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus is of apostolic origin and after the 5th century, St. Augustine insisted on its universal observance. The scripture readings of today particularly first and the third tell us about the Ascension. Jesus their beloved master was taken up from among their midst and the angels told them to go and search for him among the living and not among the dead. They are now called upon to think in a new way, to visualize

Jesus as a universal person. They are totally assured that the Lord was with them and help them in their work.

The message that Jesus gave was very clear that they are to go into the entire world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved: but the one who does not believe will be condemned. In other words, those who would not believe and refuse to come to Jesus would cut themselves off from his presence. However to those who believe, Jesus promised to bless them with spiritual signs. In the Name of Jesus they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. It is absolutely necessary that one be born of new life through water and Spirit in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Having said this Jesus returned to his Father. After being taken up into Heaven, the disciples went out and proclaimed the Good News everywhere. Today, we visualise the fruit of their work because Jesus worked with them and confirmed the messages by the signs that accompanied the Gospel. Even after he was taken up into heaven and they were filled with their awe and uncertainty regarding his departure. The Angels came to them and assured them that the Lord will come back to them as they had seen him go up to heaven accompanied by the clouds.

The First Reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke tells his friend Theophilus that in his earlier book namely the Gospel, he wrote an orderly account about what Jesus had done and taught from the beginning of his ministry until the day when Jesus was taken up to Heaven after giving instructions to the apostles whom he had chosen. Now he gives account of his ministry of preaching teaching and fellowship where he allowed them to talk and touch. Then Jesus commanded the disciples not to leave Jerusalem until such time as they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of the promise of the Father. He even corrects their doubts about the meaning of the kingdom. He tells them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." He tells them that the Ascension is the culmination of his mission on earth. Then came the cloud that took him away and he disappeared from their sight. They were given the message that Jesus shall return in the same way that He was taken up into Heaven.

In the Letter to the Ephesians Paul is praying God to give his Ephesians converts an ever deeper insight into the mercy and love of God the Father who made them members of Christ in the church and called them to share the divine heritage. He advises the Christian community that they should lead a

life worthy of the calling granted to them with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. They are reminded that there is One Body of Christ and one Spirit of God. The Body of Christ is the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church that Jesus has instituted on earth. To this Body and Spirit, all have been called to the one hope of calling, to one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Paul reminds the Ephesians of the marvellous generosity and goodness of God who had made them one in Jesus and called them to be sharers of the glory of Christ which was the eternal glory of God. He prayed that God would enlighten their minds to try to understand and appreciate the marvellous things God had done for them through incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord.

The optional Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews describes the experience of the Ascension in very biblical language, highly redolent of the Hebrew (Old) Testament. Christ is our one and only High Priest. He did not, like the Temple's High Priest, enter a humanly-built sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, but entered directly into the sanctuary of God's presence on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the former high priest entered the Holy of Holies every year with "blood not his own", the blood of animals. Otherwise, Jesus would have to suffer on our behalf again and again. The sacrifice he offered is complete and without blemish offered once and for all to the heavenly Father on behalf of all the peoples.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus has now moved away from them as he was teaching to them. Now what Ascension says is this: Jesus is totally and forever reunited with the Father. The actual words of Acts are that "a cloud took him from their sight". Now a cloud in Scripture is the symbol for God just like the other symbols given to us, like the thunder, lightning, mountain, wind, fire, tent and so on. So the expression that a cloud took him away means that God the Father took his incarnate Son back to himself. And that is also the meaning of Mark in today's Gospel that the "Lord Jesus...was taken up into heaven". His going away was forever and they would not now find Jesus in the sky, up there in "heaven". They are now called upon to "lower their eyes" and look down the earth. Jesus also asks them to go back to Jerusalem. Jesus their master would be found and made present by them and in them. They and we in word and deed are to tell and re-tell the story of Jesus' life, suffering, death and resurrection. They - and we - are to call people to a radical conversion, to forgiveness of their sin through an intimate reconciliation with God, with their brothers and sisters and with the world in which they live and are a part.

Luke is the only Gospel that Chronicles the ascension of Jesus. In the Gospel it took place on Easter day whereas in the Acts of the Apostles it took place after 40 days. We do not have to choose between them. The point is that the earthly ministry of Jesus was now complete and the mission of the church began with it. The Ascension story follows a similar pattern of other biblical departure scenes. In those scenes there is always found a Blessing, the departure, a response from the witness and finally an act of obedience. All of these elements are found in the Ascension narrative here. With the Ascension story, the Gospel ends where it is started, namely in Jerusalem. The final act of the disciples is to worship. This is a fitting conclusion to the Gospel and perhaps the only appropriate response a reader could give. The wonderful things that were promised in the infancy narrative and throughout the ministry of Jesus have been accomplished. Jesus has returned to the father and the work of the church has begun. However, he tells the Apostles as he would tell us today that we must be fully prepared for the mission and fully equipped to proclaim the Good news. That is why he tells them how important it is that they await for the coming of the Holy Spirit who will guide them in their work. Their need for further transformation is apparent from the question they ask Jesus during those final moments he is spending with them. Still bound by earthly interests they ask him the time when the kingdom would be restored. In response, Jesus steers their thoughts towards the Father and the Plan of Salvation God has set in place. The Ascension likewise directs their attention to a kingdom but not a kingdom of this world.

Today, on the feast of the Ascension, we remember the "exaltation" of Jesus, as he is raised up to share equal glory with his Father. Jesus, before he leaves his disciples, gives them their mission. Jesus, who confined himself to the people of Israel, tells them to continue his work all over the world. They will be able to do what Jesus himself could not do. "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father". They will be able to preach the Gospel to the whole world. This mission involves the call to evangelise people, secondly to continue the healing work of Jesus, thirdly they will receive the power from the Holy Spirit, and finally the Christian community is never alone. God the Father, the Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit will always be with them. This feast reminds us that Jesus is present in our hearts. He is present in his apostolic Church. He is physically present in the Holy Eucharist and in the Sacred Tabernacle. As mysterious as it appears, while He has ascended, our faith affirms to us that He is still here with us.

The Ascension of the Lord affirms that Jesus was the Messiah. St. Luke emphasized that the proclaiming of repentance and the forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in His Name. This emphasis, in "His Name," shifts the faith of the believers from Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, to the divinity of Jesus. "For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell bodily." At the same time Ascension of the Lord Jesus opened the door for the beginning of the Divine ministry of the Holy Spirit. Here Jesus raised His hands and blessed His disciples. The blessing of Jesus was not just an ordinary blessing. It was a blessing from the True High Priest, He who is a priest forever, who has returned to the Father. Thus the moment of the Ascension, the living hope of all Christians has been for the Second Coming of Christ, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him. It is also the hope that since his ascension, He has been the Mediator between God and humankind. The ascension of our Lord took place a long time ago but his parting words are to be taken to heart and carried out today courageously like the Apostles to be his witnesses in the world of today.

The Ascension of our Lord took place a long time ago but his parting words are still vibrant to us and must be carried out courageously to be his witnesses in the world of today like the first Apostles. Hence the feast of the Ascension is not to commemorate a departure but the celebration of the living and lasting presence of Jesus in the church. Jesus tells the disciples of the present situation as he gives the command to "make disciples" of people everywhere. He now introduces them to his mission as he passes on his own authority to his disciples. Pentecost will be the confirmation of this. They are asked to do what he himself did. They now have the power to reconcile the sinful persons with God and with the community and to decide who are not yet ready for reconciliation and full participation in the community's life. Hence there are four aspects to this mission which Jesus gives in today's Gospel: to evangelize, that is, to communicate the life and vision of Jesus, to continue the healing mission of Jesus both physical and spiritual, to experience the power of the Holy Spirit, and experience the presence of Jesus. He will be with us till the end of times. Then Jesus promises us that like him we all will be raised and ascend to the Father. During the coming week, let us remember that Jesus, who has ascended into Heaven, is here with us, is present in our hearts, in his apostolic Church and in a special way present in the Holy Eucharist. As we live this Ascension of our Lord, let us look forward to experience him in our lives and be his messengers in the world of today.

Word spread across the countryside about the wise Holy Man who lived in a small house atop the mountain. A man from the village decided to make the

long and difficult journey to visit him. When he arrived at the house, he saw an old servant inside the house that came forward to greet him at the door. "I would like to see the wise Holy Man," he said to the servant. The servant smiled and led him inside. As they walked through the house, the man from the village looked eagerly around the house, anticipating his encounter with the Holy Man. Before he knew it, he had been led to the back door and escorted outside. He stopped and turned to the servant, "But I want to see the Holy Man!" "You already have," said the old man. "Everyone you may meet in life, even if they appear plain and insignificant... see each of them as a wise Holy Man. If you do this, then whatever problem you brought here today will be solved."

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